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SUBJECT: FINLAND'S RUSSIAN SPEAKING MINORITY: INVITED BUT
NOT ALWAYS WELCOME

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Finland's Russian-speaking minority is the largest immigrant group in the country. Most Russian-speaking immigrants are ethnically Finnish, and have come since the 1990s as part of a government program to encourage resettlement of ethnic Finns in the Karelia region, lost to Russia in the 1940s. Despite being invited to settle in Finland, this community has found integration difficult. A common stereotype is one of mafia criminality, but the reality is one of often highly-educated people coming because of family connections. The failure of many immigrants to learn Finnish creates a barrier to social and economic participation, resulting in high unemployment. Aside from ethnic Finns, ethnic Russians are also coming to Finland. Finnish officials express some concerns about that extremely small population, in particular about trouble from disaffected and disconnected youths. Another concern comes from increasing tourism from Russia, and with it the irritation of Russians purchasing the famous Finnish country cottages. Though polls show Russian-speakers are among the least-liked immigrant groups, Finnish officials and representatives of the immigrant community note that tensions are generally low and incidents fairly isolated. Nevertheless, the government is actively seeking ways to integrate this community. End summary.

Russian-speaking Minority Presence in Finland

2.(U) According to FARO (Finnish Association of Russian-Speaker Organizations/Finljandskaja Assotsiatsija Russkojazychnyh Obshestv) and official Finnish sources, Finland's Russian-speaking community is the country's largest immigrant group. The community is small but growing: numbering approximately 42,000 in 2006, by the end of 2008 the Finnish population included approximately 50,000 whose mother tongue is Russian. A majority live in the Helsinki region; the remainder live in considerably smaller populations predominately in the southeast, close to the Russian border.

¶3. (U) Almost half of these Russian-speaking immigrants are not ethnically Russian. Many are of Finnish or related ethnicity (e.g., Ingric). Finns and related ethnic groups, and their descendants, remained when Finland lost the Karelia region to Russia in the Continuation War (1941-1944). The collapse of the Soviet Union presented the Government of Finland (GoF) with an opportunity, and in the 1990s it adopted a policy to encourage Ingrians and others to settle in Finland (many, but not all, spoke Russian). A large wave came to Finland in the 1990s; the GoF did not track this influx carefully, creating difficulties in measuring the Ingric presence in the country. (NOTE: The GoF has limited population statistics based on ethnicity. After gaining Finnish citizenship the GoF no longer lists ethnicity, leaving mother tongue as the most useful statistic. END NOTE.)

14. (U) After the initial surge of immigrants the GoF tightened immigration and citizenship rules. Despite the restrictions, immigration of Russian-speakers remains significant. According to the GoF, the number applying for Finnish residence permits coming from Russia and Estonia doubled over the last two years, from 5,000 to 10,000. Official statistics show that most immigrate to Finland because of a spouse (typically a native Finnish husband) or other family relationship. Media reports point to the global economic slump for the surge in applications.

Social and economic participation proves difficult

15. (U) Despite family and ethnic connections, native Finns often view Russian-speakers in a negative light. Russian-speakers report feeling that the media stereotypes them as mafia criminals. Polls show that they are among the least-liked groups of immigrants, next to Arabs and Somalis. Officials at the Ombudsman for Minorities Office say they have received numerous reports of Finnish students bullying Russian-speaking students. Unemployment for this group remains higher than the population as a whole.

16. (U) The reality often differs significantly from the negative perception: Russian-speakers commonly arrive in Finland with a good education, and researchers note about 40 percent have graduated from university or polytechnic education, a number higher than the native Finnish population. Academic studies also show that this community does not contribute disproportionately to the overall crime rate. In fact, from 1997 to 2007, the number of crimes involving at least one Russian-speaker has fallen by almost 1,000 cases even though total criminal cases increased by

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nearly 100,000.

Ethnic Russians in Finland raise concerns

17. (SBU) The Russian-speaking minority includes ethnic Russians, typically from Russia or Estonia. Though a small community, GoF officials view it with some concern, for while it faces the same language barrier as the Ingric-Russian-speaking minority, it lacks the ethnic ties. For that reason GoF officials view ethnic Russian teenagers as the most at-risk of all Russian-speakers and worry that they will join groups outside society participating in drug-trafficking, nationalistic or racist activities (officials express similar concerns about other minority groups, like the growing Muslim community).

18. (SBU) The number of ethnic Russian residents may be small but GoF officials estimate that the number of Russian visitors to Finland is significant and rising: roughly 50,000 Russians are in Finland on any given day. GoF reports that Finland's four diplomatic missions in Russia processed over 90 percent of the approximately 800,000 annual (mostly non-immigrant) visa applications for 2008. Most Russians come for tourism: GoF officials state that only one in six Russians come for work (for example, as Russian language teachers, special needs assistants at schools, or low-skill jobs), and that 30 percent of all tourists are Russian.

19. (SBU) Russian visitors have been purchasing hundreds of the famous Finnish country cottages. Though these purchases represent approximately one percent of all real estate transactions in Finland, they raise the ire of many Finns, who complain that Russian law prevents them from purchasing homes in the formerly Finnish portion of the Karelia region. Concerned about a negative perception of those purchases, a FARO representative told Poloff that the purchases do not represent a concerted Russian land-grab but the desire for relaxation in a relatively crime-free environment.

Movement towards integration

¶10. (SBU) GoF officials remain concerned about strong ties to Russia that inhibit the community's social participation in Finland. The community looks almost exclusively to Russian-based media for information. Russian interests are also reaching directly into Finland: this summer the Russian Orthodox Church announced plans to expand in Finland in order to cater to the needs of its Russian population.

¶11. (SBU) GoF officials acknowledge that Finland needs to do more to increase this community's participation in the larger society. The government plans to increase Russian-language school instruction. YLE, the national broadcaster, currently includes Russian language news and programs on its multi-lingual YLEMONDO station, and has plans for a Russian-language television station. The City of Helsinki has a privately-funded and run Russian-language radio station, Radio Sputnik. GoF officials have spoken to Finnish Orthodox Church officials about providing some services in Russian.

¶12. (SBU) In a meeting with Embassy staff, a FARO representative sought to downplay the GoF's concerns. She differentiated Finland's experience from that of the Baltic countries, pointing out that Russian-speakers seek to live in Finland and are not like Russian-speakers in former Soviet countries who "awoke one morning to find themselves in another country." The representative was optimistic about prospects for integration. Separately, the Ombudsman's Office echoed this sentiment, noting that while attitudes are slow to change, Finnish employers, particularly in eastern Finland, have started to appreciate Russian-speakers.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Given Finland's history with Russia it is not surprising that the presence - temporary or indefinite - of even a small Russian-speaking population would generate some tension. As a result, when one's primary language is Russian, possessing ethnic or familial ties to Finland may not mitigate or insulate one from negative attention. Overall, the concerns surrounding this community appear disproportionate to the reality. The level of tension is quite low, and as the population increases the government seems to be prudently and actively engaging in integrating that community into Finnish society.

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